

An Alternate Route: An Open Letter to Despairing Magnet School Students

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Kalamazoo Area Mathematics and Science Center, Class of 2003

I have to admit that I was pretty surprised to receive an email asking that I submit a piece of writing about What My Magnet School Experience Has Done For Me. By the status on my current alumni information page, I would consider myself the least relevant former student from whom to solicit a commendation of my time at a magnet school. I attended the Kalamazoo Area Math and Science School and graduated in 2003 and am currently a graduate student at Stanford University (attendance at a distinguished institution, graduate school – so far so good), but I am enrolled in the Ph.D. program for English Literature. Cue the sound of a record player needle falling out of groove.

But I'm actually pretty pleased to have the opportunity to write this, because it's certainly something I've thought a lot about over the last several years. It's a question I've gotten many times, mostly in interview situations – you attended a math and science magnet school? Why are you interested in English literature? What's that about? And the answer is that my Magnet School Experience had a huge effect on what I've decided to pursue and where my interests currently lie. As soon as I finished high school, I went to Kenyon College, home of the renowned literary magazine *The Kenyon Review* and a place of truly excellent liberal arts teaching. I decided to go to graduate school and am now thrilled to be where I am, studying the Victorian novel and basking in the California sun. In other words, I examined my experience at magnet school and decided to run, as fast and as far as I could, in the opposite direction.

The transformation was gradual. KAMSC is a four year program, and during ninth and tenth grade my goal was to do as well as possible in my biology

and pre-calculus classes, although it quickly became apparent that it was going to be much more difficult than originally anticipated. Things started slipping around chemistry and trigonometry, and by the time I got to eleventh grade my parents had the sense that completing KAMSC was for me an act of willpower without much affinity for the subject matter. This was by no means a failure of teaching, a reaction to a difficult social situation, or a default in the KAMSC program – most of my best friends went there, I was happy to hang out in the lounge between classes, I loved having a much smaller educational environment than the one offered by my home school, and to this day I look back on Mr. Sinclair's astronomy and geology courses (Stars and Rocks) as among my favorite classes.

What quickly became clear to me, though, was that I was just not into math and science. And I have to say, to this day I am thankful to KAMSC for making it as obvious as it became. It may seem as if the most I can say for my education there is that it made it ridiculously easy for me to pass my Qualitative Reasoning credits in college, but the truth goes much deeper. I'm not sure I would have figured out what I really wanted to do as rapidly or as assuredly as I did without some pretty rigorous forces pulling me the other way. I was able to go to college with a much more solid sense of what I wanted to do, which allowed me to focus and gave me a strong sense of self that has served me well in the past years.

If anything, I think KAMSC may actually have been more important for me than it was for the multitude of its alumni who have gone on to math- and science-related careers. My boyfriend of five years, also a KAMSC alumni, is currently a graduate student working towards his Ph.D. in

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organic chemistry, and as important as KAMSC was for him, it was essentially just one in a series of stepping stones leading him to where he is now. I have no doubt it helped him to get into prestigious universities and get the internships he wanted, but it has been a link in a long chain of science education, and so its significance in the scheme of the whole is not as readily apparent to him as it is to me. For me, KAMSC was not part of a continuation along a straight line, but instead marked a sharp right turn away from what I initially considered to be my interests – KAMSC showed me the way forward in math and science, but it simultaneously offered me the possibility of an alternate route. It helped define me in the negative space of what it was not, and it was undoubtedly one of the most influential and significant educational experiences I have ever had.

I come now to the subtitle of this essay, “An Open Letter to Despairing Magnet School Students.” I have no doubt that in the midst of the teeming swarm of happily working students at math schools, specialized art institutions, at music conservatories and engineering programs, there are a few who are wondering what on earth they’ve gotten themselves into. Each day they become more and more certain that the last thing they want to do with their lives is be a professional statistician, and to these students I say – have hope! This may seem to be a terrible moment where you realize you’re doing something you don’t want to do, but the incredible upside is that you can now confidently search for an alternate route.

Good luck,
Kathryn VanArendonk